

## Delegates: Feds' cars should get better mileage

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WASHINGTON -- With America's oil addiction now acknowledged by the president, the federal government should be the first to join a rehab program, say frustrated New England lawmakers who have long sought to reduce gas consumption in government vehicles.

Several efforts by lawmakers seeking to make the sprawling federal fleet of cars and trucks more fuel efficient have sputtered to a stop over the years. If those efforts had been adopted years ago, supporters say it could mean lower gas prices today.

Even now, proposals to slow the fleet's consumption of gas are languishing as supply and demand drives up prices at the pump.

Federal agencies, meanwhile, have largely missed targeted levels of gas reduction as demanded in an executive order issued by Bill Clinton in the last months of his presidency.

If achieved, measures requiring government vehicles to burn less gas while traveling farther could save taxpayers money, reduce the effects on global warming and set a model of efficiency that could transfer to cars nationwide, supporters say.

"Congress should be demanding better performance for all vehicles, including those used right here on the Capitol grounds," Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., said in a written statement. "This is a wonderful chance to lead by example."

Jeffords, who outranks all but the chairman on the Senate's environment committee, has co-sponsored 11 bills to increase fuel efficiency nationwide since 1990.

This year he proposed reducing gas consumption in the federal fleet by 30 percent by 2016 -- an ambitious plan that would largely be realized through increased use of alternative fuel vehicles.

The amendment, attached to measure proposing \$100 gas rebates for Americans, fell by the wayside last month.

Massachusetts Congressman John Olver, a Democrat, meanwhile, is seeking to increase the fuel efficiency of every federal government-owned car by 6 mpg by 2012. It has not received a hearing.

"We've done really nothing in the past few years," Olver said of limiting the fleet's consumption.

Such moves could eventually reduce the stress on Americans' pocketbooks, supporters say. And Olver, a co-chairman of Congress' Climate Change Caucus, said it would "reduce by a huge proportion the amount of (carbon dioxide) that goes into the atmosphere."

The federal fleet is large. Numbering 585,000 mail trucks, official cars and work vehicles, the fleet burns 278 million gallons of gas each year, according to the Department of Energy. Those numbers do not include military and police vehicles.

"At a time when gas prices are at record levels and we are deeply concerned about global warming and air pollution, it is beyond belief that cars on the road today get less gas mileage, on average, than they did some 20 years ago," Congressman Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., said in a prepared statement, citing the dramatic rise in SUV use.

Sanders has proposed dramatic increases to fuel efficiency standards. Passenger cars would go from getting 27.5

mpg now to 45 mpg by 2016. Also, light trucks would go from 20.7 mpg to 34 mpg in that same period.

"These increases would save consumers about \$80 billion a year at the pump, 1.3 billion gallons of oil a year, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 1.5 trillion pounds a year," Sanders' statement continued.

Massachusetts Congressman Edward Markey, the senior Democrat on the House Energy Committee, has proposed a similar plan, though more modest.

"The president got it right when he said we are addicted to oil, but regrettably he is doing nothing to help cure the pathology," Markey said in a written statement. "The president hasn't even shown enough leadership to require the cars used by the federal government to be more fuel efficient."

The notion of making the federal fleet more fuel efficient largely lives and dies by one dominant factor: the effect it would have on new cars across the country, and the companies that make them.

Supporters say it would set a precedent, compelling automakers to use known technology -- not experimental alternative fuel engines -- in all the cars they make, creating a national fleet that could drive farther on less gas.

Opponents say the savings for consumers would be negligible, and create an economic burden for the nation's struggling auto industry, threatening jobs.

Reflecting the volatility of the debate, the corporate average fuel economy standards, known as CAFE, for passenger cars have not been raised since their adoption 28 years ago. The initial standards required automakers to increase fuel efficiency in cars from 18 mpg in 1978 to 27.5 mpg in 1985 -- the same standard that applies today.

Increasing efficiency in the federal fleet, therefore, is chained to the prospect of making sweeping changes to all cars.

For that reason, some of the fiercest supporters of reducing oil consumption have abandoned the effort to make gas-burning cars more fuel efficient, saying the issue is too divisive. Instead they've turned to what they say is the future: alternative fuel vehicles.

The cars run on ethanol, propane, natural gas, hydrogen, electricity and biodiesel.

"People can talk about CAFE, but unless they can show you the votes, they're just talking," said Anne Korin, chairwoman of Set America Free, a coalition seeking to reduce U.S. oil consumption. "I don't think we have time to waste on these political battles."

The coalition, which promotes alternative fuel vehicles, says U.S. oil consumption would continue to grow even if a dramatic increase in gas efficiency standards were implemented nationwide.

"It's like somebody who's 300 pounds losing five pounds," Korin said of increasing gas efficiency standards.

But Olver says the "quickest" way to reduce pollution and fuel costs is to increase the efficiency of gas cars -- a task that once implemented will take up to 15 years to realize the benefits as older cars are cycled out of use.

"Increasing efficiency is the fastest thing we can do," he said. "The idea of switching over from a gasoline economy to an ethanol economy -- a lot of research needs to be done. It would take probably 40 years."

Months before President Clinton's second term expired in 2000, he issued an executive order requiring all federal agencies to reduce their gas consumption by at least 20 percent by the end of fiscal 2005.

The agencies were ordered to buy vehicles that burn alternative fuels, replace light trucks with cars, and just drive less.

Four years into the experiment, they were on the road to failure. The final report has not been completed, however, the most recent assessment, from 2004, says the agencies as a whole reduced their gas consumption

by about half of 1 percent -- despite the acquisition of 14,811 alternative fuel vehicles.

In 1999, the agencies used 279.6 million gallons of gas; in 2004, consumption had dropped to 277.9 million gallons.

"The federal fleet was successful in slightly decreasing petroleum consumption, but is not yet close to achieving the 20 percent reduction" required by Clinton's order, the Department of Energy said in its latest report.